A Study of *The Years*

by

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The Waves stands at the peak of Virginia Woolf's creative life. She began to distinguish herself with *Jacob's Room* and proved herself to be more competent with each book that followed it. *To the Lighthouse* is definitely better than *Mrs. Dalloway*. *Orlando* is more extraordinary than *To the Lighthouse* in the sense it is written more freely with full play to the author's genius, her fantastic way of thinking in images. Then *The Waves* is by far the best of all her books. The poetry, the deepest cry of her soul, is poured and condensed into *The Waves* to make it her confession, a spiritual autobiography. If *To the Lighthouse* is not only the memoir of her family but also her own confession, *The Waves* is the symbolic biography of herself and her Bloomsbury friends.

It seems she had said all she had to say about her Self repeatedly and in different ways by the time she finished *The Waves*. Virginia Woolf is a very personal writer. All of her works up to *The Waves* are about herself, her family and friends, and even when she started to write about other beings than herself such as Clarissa Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay, she always put her identity into them. This is the point

sometimes blamed by critics but at the same time such a defect is only the other side of one shield, for her absorption in her own existence was for her nothing but the way that leads her into the essence of "be ing" as we read in *The Waves*, the masterpiece and her song of existence.

Flush, *The Years*, *Three Guineas*, *Roger Fry* and *Between the Acts*, the books written in her last period after *The Waves*, are all about anything but her own Self. They are more directly about "other people." If these works are inferior in any way to her former ones, we might point out at least as one of the reasons that the author had done with her personal matters as the theme of her novels and set out to handle something more impersonal to which she was not quite used hitherto. She began to expand the field of her vision instead of digging and sinking deeper as she used to do. The way from *The Years* to *Between the Acts* was for the author a strenuous journey to master to write something not personal, something more universal and detached from her own Self, something external and yet capable of expressing her airy thoughts.

Autobiographically the last period seems to have been the darkest one for Virginia Woolf. To read her wartime *Diary* is a painful experience. She is getting old and her dear friends have gone one by one. She suffers as usual from nervous tension. The writing of *Flush*, a fantastic biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's spaniel, the book meant to be a fun to write as *Orlando* once was, is for her no longer a pleasure. She is sarcastic about herself imagining it will achieve some popular success as a charming ladylike work. While writing *The*

Years she is often prevented her writing by the usual headaches, with the doubts about the value of her writing becoming more disturbing than ever as the *Diary* tells: "I have never suffered, since *The Voyage Out*, such acute despair on re-reading, as this time. On Saturday for instance: there I was, faced with complete failure: and yet the book is being printed. Then I set to: in despair; thought of throwing it away." But she goes on typing and after a while comes to think "it may be my best book."[1] As usual, or perhaps harder than usual, she swings between despair and comfort. On the whole, however, she seems to have thought *The Years* a failure and says "miracle" when Leonard Woolf was very much moved, "almost in tears", after reading the book and praised it. But the fact was, as her husband tells later, that she was so dangerously nervous and on the verge of breakdown that she had to be comforted.

The Years and *Three Guineas* won public praise despite her anxiety. The novel became a best-seller in America; she received many letters from the readers of her pacifist essay. But she never became heartily happy perhaps because she was after all a good judge of her own writings and did not believe *The Years* was as good as *To the Lighthouse* or *The Waves*. In those days she got more and more worried about criticism which was becoming increasingly unsympathetic to her books. Her thirty years connection with the *Times Literary Supplement* was ended[2] and some of her articles were turned down by the once

1) Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* (London, 1953), p. 267.
2) *Ibid.*, p. 293.

sympathetic magazines. The death of her friends, such as Janet Case, Roger Fry and Viola Tree, left her intolerably sad and lonely. Then there was the War with many air raids that destroyed her London house and she was terribly miserable in the country.

Perhaps she knew better than anyone else that the time of her life was over. She was a very personal writer who lived mostly within the circle of her own visionary world and when she had said everything about her own self, she had to write something not very personal this time. The author stands outside the Pargiters in *The Years* and the Olivers in *Between the Acts*. The intense tone of confession gave vitality to *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. When Virginia Woolf tried to write something apart from her self, her writing lost the sense of that pungent intensity although the style is mature and the goodness of each scene is remarkable. Virginia Woolf is a very clever novelist but by no means a versatile one. She is far more in her own element when she is concerned with the internal than the external, the fantastic than the real, and the metaphoric than the thing as it is.

We have seen how her world swings between the two realms of vision and reality. We know how competent she is with her realistic sketches of shapes and colors which are at once precise and imaginary as shown in such pieces as "Kew Gardens" and "The Mark on the Wall." Her novels are full of the same vivid and fantastic pictures. Indeed a remarkable characteristic of Virginia Woolf as artist is found in the unique visionary world created by her. Being a born generalizer she tended to grasp things in terms of symbols. The tug towards

visions, what she called "the flight of mind," was always a very strong impulse in her. This was the very element that made her personality very attractive to her friends who remember her airy talks. Lytton Strachey advised her to write something absolutely fantastic. The same thought made Leonard Woolf decide that some passages in her diary were not printable being mere fantastic fictions. We imagine that Virginia Woolf quite often lived on the borderline between the world of reality and that of her own imagination, like Sara Pargiter, and Septimus Warren Smith whose strange imagination is no doubt part of his neurosis.

Her love of symbolism seems to have a close connection with the flight of her mind from the real into the sphere of airy imagination. The unique quality of *Jacob's Room* is found in its contrived metaphor. Through a series of realistic sketches we go after the fleeing figure of Jacob Flanders, looking for the answer to the question who Jacob is, until finally we enter his room and find it empty —— Jacob as the novelist's idea of "a human being" is gone out of our reach (metaphorically), killed in the war (actually). *Mrs. Dalloway* stands between the real and the metaphoric less steadily than the later novels. The balance is held far more skillfully in *To the Lighthouse* owing to its finely wrought structure. *Orlando* and *The Waves* show her leap boldly into the purely fantastic sphere and achieve something that is really Virginia Woolf. Her inclination towards the visionary is realized triumphantly in those books in which the entire weight is put on the poetical. For Virginia Woolf the tug to the fantastic was really strong for she again

and again goes back to it even if her first plan was to write in a historian's realistic manner. In novels and even in such essays as *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* she could not do without a metaphorical framework.

Being a serious experimenter, Virginia Woolf always wanted to create something new and *The Years* was intended from the start to be a very different book from *The Waves*. It was to be "a novel of fact," "an Essay Novel," and to be the "first cousin to *Orlando*" which taught her how to write the external.[3] After the confession of the solitary soul in the closed yet many-faceted room of *The Waves*, she wanted to go out into the world of people and things, "to take in everything, sex, education, life, etc."[4] It was to be a chronicle to be called *The Pargiters*. Yet such an enormous novel as *Forsyte Saga* or *Die Buddenbrooks* was not for her to try. Hers was naturally more fragmentary, more like a collection of sketches like *Jacob's Room*. She intended her new novel to "come, with the most powerful and agile leaps, like a chamois, across precipices from 1880 to here and now."[5] Such words of hers as these may indicate her stronger interest in grasping the idea of the human being existing in time and history than in depicting a detailed history of a particular family with minute portraits of the characters. In other words, while insisting to write "the novel of fact," she is yet by nature more attracted by the creation of the novel as metaphor.

3) *Ibid.*, p. 190.
4) *Ibid.*, p. 189.
5) *Ibid.*, p. 189.

It took her over three years to write *The Years* and as she wrote she thought of many tentative titles. The little history of the changing titles may serve as a proof of Virginia Woolf's attitude towards writing novels. *The Years* was first conceived as *The Pargiters*, "an essay novel," and called so on and off till finally it was given the present title. In between it was called by turns *Here and Now*, *Music*, *Dawn*, *Sons and Daughters*, *Daunghters and Sons*, *Ordinary People* and *The Caravan*.

At the start the author enjoys her new style and method:

> • • • after abstaining from the novel of fact all these years — since 1919 — and *Night and Day* is dead — I find myself infinitely delighting in facts for a change, and in possession of quantities beyond counting • • •[6]

She believes: "This is the true line, I am sure after *The Waves* — *The Pargiters*—this is what leads naturally on to the next stage."[7] Through the Pargiter family she presents the historical scenes of England from 1880 to the present day. She sets out as a historian who is concerned with facts, but even in the early stage she writes: "I feel now and then the tug to vision but resist it."[8] No words express Virginia Woolf better. She was a visionary who was always tugged towards the airy world of images and symbols made of fantastic shapes and colors.

She sways between facts and visions and re-writing the same passages over and over again she feels: "It seems to me that the realness of the beginning is complete. I have a good excuse for poetry in the second part, if I can take it. Rather an interesting experiment — if I

6) *Ibid.*, p. 189.
7) *Ibid.*, p. 189.
8) *Ibid.*, p. 189.
9) *Ibid.*, p. 211.

could see the same thing from two different views."[9] Then she suddenly thinks of a more abstract title *Here and Now*, which had once occured to her as a title for *The Waves*, that "eyeless mystical book," because: "It shows what I'm after and does not compete with the Herries Saga, the Forsyte Saga and so on."[10] Further on she writes: "Why not one of these days, write a fantasy on the theme of Crabbe? —a biographical fantasy — an experiment in biography."[11] Having written *Flush*, a curious biography of a dog, and perhaps getting tired of the "facts" of *The Pargiters*, she longs for a fantasy. And about the novel she is writing she says:

> But I am thinking all the time of what to end *Here and Now*. I want a chorus, a general statement, a song for four voices. Now am I to get it? I am now almost within the sight of the end, racing along: become more and more dramatic. And how to make the transition from the coloquial to the lyrical, from the particular to the general?[12]

How to end a novel is always an important task for a novelist. To study the endings of Virginia Woolf's novels as a whole would present an interesting answer to some essential characteristic of this novelist. *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* end with the characters' having had a vision that makes them recognize and accept life in a certain way, while *The Waves* leads all the way to the understanding of Life, Death and Existence in the universal cycle of time. *The Years* ends with a more hopeful tone than any of her novels ever have done. *Music* or *Dawn* which suggests such qualities as beauty, purity or hope

10) *Ibid.*, p. 211.
11) *Ibid.*, pp. 211–2.
12) *Ibid.*, p. 221.

appears as an alternate title for *The Pargiters*. Eleanor looks forwards benignly to the future while the author tells in the *Diary*: "I don't think I have been more excited over a book than I am writing the end of — shall it be *Dawn*? Or is it too emphatic, sentimental……"[13]

With such excitement the tone of *The Years* becomes more optimistic and hopeful than ever. Soon afterwards she thinks she had been carried too far away and goes back to such titles as *Sons and Daughters* and *Daughters and Sons* which suggest her returning to her first intention of writing about the social scenes. This realistic mood continues and makes her think of *The Ordinary People* as another title and then take up *The Pargiters* again. Before long she suddenly thinks of *The Caravan*. which is a metaphor of Life as journey as imagined by Isa of *Between the Acts*, but she soon returns to *The Pargiters* after all, until finally it is settled to be *The Years*.[14]

The changes made about the title in such a way show that the author started to write a novel of fact, a history of a particular family, and did write it but finally she ended with a title suggesting something abstract and universal. To study the titles of her other books may add some interesting argument. *The Voyage Out* and *To the Lighthouse* suggest both the action and the spiritual experience which the characters get through that action: hence quite metaphorical. The "room" of *Jacob's Room* is of course one of Virginia Woolf's favorite metaphors. *Mrs. Dalloway* once had the abstract name *The Hours*. *The Waves* sounds definitely symbolical. Her last two novels, *The Years* and

13) *Ibid.*, p. 223.
14) *Ibid.*, p. 235.

Between the Acts, were at first called *The Pargiters* and *Pointz Hall* respectively according to the names of the family and the house; the final christening of the books in both cases prove how the author after all preferred the abstract to the concrete, the universal to the particular.

Virginia Woolf the visionary had also a curiously and remarkably practical interests in social phenomenon as manifested, for example, in her theory of the importance of 500 pounds a year and a room of one's own. She was tremendously conscious of the difficulty of a woman writing books in the society as it had been for centuries. *The Years* was to be the book expressing her serious concern with history and women's life, the years she herself had lived from 1880 to the present day.

The early pages present the reader with a family portrait of the Victorians with the Victorian patriarch at the center. Colonel Pargiter, retired and rich, with an invalid wife and seven children, lives at Abercorn Terrace. He goes to his club to chat with friends and then drops at the room of his mistress who asks him for a little money to pay the laundry bill. At home, however, he is a dignified father, to whom his daughter talks "rather as if [she] were a child reciting a lessen."[15] The boys go to Oxford, become a scholar, barrister and soldier. The four girls do not go to school. Eleanor is interested in social work and like Mrs. Ramsay visits and helps the poor while she takes care of the house for her father and remains unmarried. Milly, a

15) Virginia Woolf, *The Years* (London, 1951), p. 12.

common and silly girl, makes a most ordinary marriage with her brother's friend. Delia throws herself into the Irish Movement, makes speeches at meetings and marries an Irishman. Rose the youngest becomes a radical feminist, throws stones at policemen to be put into prison many times. Along with Colonel Pargiter's family are introduced into the novel Digby Pargiter his brother and the Malones their relatives.

The Years traces the disintegration of such a family life and looks forwards to the younger generation. Mother dies and then Father. The houses are sold or let. Crosby the servant is pensioned off and brothers and sisters are dispersed. And now the Victorian family life seems to be "an abominable system" which is represented by Abercorn Terrace with "one bathroom, and a basement; and there all those different people had lived, boxed together, telling lies."[16]

The disintegration of the family as it occured to Digby's family is described more pathetically and beautifully. The scene in which Eugenie and two little girls, Maggie and Sara, have a birthday bonfire in the garden remains like a happy dream hour in the past, like that one evening of Mrs. Ramsay's party except for the latter's powerful symbolical quality. Eugenie with her foreign beauty, her habit of exaggeration, her tender affection for the children and her eccentricity reminds us of Mrs. Ramsay. Being as extraordinary as well as human like Mrs. Ramsay, Eugenie lacks (and was not meant to have) that goddess-like quality which was Mrs. Ramsay's. She dies and then her husband

16) *Ibid.*, p. 132.

Digby, and the house is sold. Maggie and Sara go to live in a poor street, cooking for themselves and sewing their own dresses. Maggie marries a French man and Sara tries to get a job, only unsuccessfully. Sara with her slight deformity and her poem-talking is herself an elegy of the disintegrating family.

In Kitty Malone a different phase of history seems to be revealed. There is no disintegration in Kitty in a sense. Born in the midst of the Oxford tradition, she longs for something new. Even as a girl she differs from her mother in her attitude towards life. She is attracted by Mrs. Fripp, an American lady with American accent and friendly open manners, by Mr. Robson, a lower class man, who made her feel "that she was nobody's daughter in particular"[17] and by Cole the chauffeur who is silent but makes her feel at ease. She hates Oxford life which is dull and Oxford people who are dingy, and becomes Lady Lasswade refusing Edward Pargiter the Oxford don. While being a rebel who is sympathetic with the new, Kitty also follows the traditional. Back at her domain in the North, she looks at her grey and stately castle — "Very noble it looked, and ancient, and enduring."[18] Yet, "All passes, all changes. Nothing of this belonged to her; her son would inherit, his wife would walk here after her."[19] It is to the land, nature, "uncultivated, uninhabited, existing by itself, for itself," that she belongs. She listens to "the land's deep murmur, a chorus"

17) *Ibid.*, p. 73.
18) *Ibid.*, p. 299.
19) *Ibid.*, pp. 299–30.

and "She was happy, completely. Time had ceased."[20] She is an Orlando becoming one with Nature (although without writing poetry).

Among a dozen Pargiters the central character is of course Eleanor Pargiter, who is "about twenty-two, no beauty, but healthy, and though tired at the moment, naturally cheerful"[21] at the beginning of the novel and nearly eighty years old when it ends with her. Eleanor seems to be altogether a different person from any of Virginia Woolf's former heroines. She is no heroine in any sense of the word: her story is not the center of any events if at all of *The Years*, which does not follow her story consistently either. She is "naturally cheerful," active and full of optimism, not introvert and over-sensitive like Virginia Woolf's other women. She is far from being any goddess but remarkably ordinary. She is kind-hearted and good-natured and enjoys life thoroughly (and not in Clarissa Dalloway's dubious way). She has little of an agnostic in her and accepts life simply and innocently. Eleanor hardly resembles the author or the image we have of her, while the earlier heroines had some definite characteristics of being the author's *alter ego*.

Is Eleanor the sign that Virginia Woolf began to write about other people than herself in *The Years*? Does the author attempt to express her view of Life in more general terms in *The Years* by means of what she calls the "external" writing? Eleanor enjoys life actively and vigorously in her old years, fears death but is not obssessed by it

20) *Ibid.*, p. 300.
21) *Ibid.*, pp. 13–4.

like other Woolfian characters, and gets angry about the war and fascism but after all looks forward to the future with hope. It is remarkable that all her external novels, *Night and Day*, *Orlando*, *The Years* and *Between the Acts*, are freer from the fear of Death than her internal ones. Death is the dominant figure that closes *The Voyage Out* and *Jacob's Room*. Clarissa and Mrs. Ramsay fear death in the midst of a sunny day. Bernard fights against Death. He throws himself against Death; he dies having overcome his fear of it.

In *The Years* the author has done with treating death as an individual experience. Death is only a phenomenon brought by Time. At the beginning of *The Years* is death; the older generations pass away but there are the younger generations to continue the human race carrying Life both biologically and spiritually. Clarissa Dalloway's transcendental theory has been cherished and enlarged throughout to be summed up in her later novels. Eleanor Pargiter is almost free from the fear of Death, and *Between the Acts*, like *Orlando*, is completely free from Death, with Life presiding over the human race in spite of such sad human attributes as the war, the general loneliness and unhappiness.

The Years ends with a more definite tone of affirmation than her former works. The tone that concludes *The Waves* is ambiguous. Although *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* end with the characters' attainment of vision, the general tone of her novels is often pathetic. After many years the Pargiters gather at Delia's party in the present day. The party is Virginia Woolf's symbolic party, "an offering"

which helps bring together the people who are otherwise scattered and lonely imperfect beings. The significance of "the Present Day," like the "Ourselves" of *Between the Acts*, is so deep in *The Years* that it even made the author think of a title *Here and Now* for the book. Eleanor at the age of nearly eighty says: "I don't want to go back into my past" since "I want the present."[22] She does not have to go back because all their past is in the present moment. People gathered at Clarissa's party carrying with them the burdens of her past, but to Delia's party they come rather to talk about themselves, about the Present Day, about Here and Now.

The Pargiters who gather at Delia's party are so different from one another (being "orts, scraps and fragments" like those who come to the Pageant in *Between the Acts*) that the picture they draw together for fun is of a strangest monster with Queen Alexandra's head, a bird's neck, the body of a tiger and stout elephant's legs, dressed in a child's drawers.[23] This game is a tremendous fun for everybody and even Peggy laughs although she has been thinking: "how can one be happy — in a world bustling with misery. On every placard at every street corner was Death; or worse — tyranny; brutality; torture; the fall of civilization; the end of freedom." For her they "are only sheltering under a leaf, which will be destroyed."[24] But while laughing with others Peggy feels relaxed and herself enlarged, for "She felt, or rather she saw, not a place, but a state of being, in which there was real

22) *Ibid.*, p. 361.
23) *Ibid.*, p. 420.
24) *Ibid.*, pp. 418–9.

laughter, real happiness, and this fractured world was whole; whole; and free."[25] She fails to communicate her half-vision, but North understands that his sister wanted to say: "You have to pick up the pieces, and make something new, something different,"[26] that she meant to say something "about another world, a new world," which they could attain by living differently.[27]

At the party the Pargiters want a speech that would sum up and unite them here and now. After many interruptions, Nicholas, a Polish who is Sara's lover, finally makes his speech with a toast to "the human race・・・which is now in its infancy, may it grow to maturity!"[28] With these words of Nicholas as a signal the scene transits from the phase of reality to that of symbols. The symbolical dawn begins and half-dreaming Eleanor thinks: "Always there were rooms; always there were people. Always from the beginning of time・・・"[29] Towards the end of *The Years* Eleanor Pargiter becomes a very imporant person, the author's mouthpiece. Her half-dream continues:

> There must be another life, —— Not in dreams; but here and now, in this room, with living people・・・since this is too short, too broken. We know nothing, even about ourselves. We're only just beginning・・・to understand, here and there.[30]

She hollows her hands so that she could "enclose the present moment;

25) *Ibid.*, p. 420.
26) *Ibid.*, p. 423.
27) *Ibid.*, p. 456.
28) *Ibid.*, pp. 459–60.
29) *Ibid.*, p. 460.
30) *Ibid.*, p. 461.

to make it stay; to fill it fuller and fuller with the past, the present and the future, until it shone, whole, bright, deep with understanding."[31]

This is the most open-handed and self-confident message Virginia Woolf had ever given to her people and to the reader although *The Years* has nothing of such a profound moment of vision experienced by Mrs. Ramsay as she watched the light of the lighthouse. Just as Eleanor thinks of "the endless night; the endless dark —— opening in front of her a very dark tunnel"[32] as Clarissa Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay did, the dawn comes. The last part of *The Years* is indeed a chorus, a symphony in praise of the unknown future, accompanied by the dawn as background. As if to affirm Eleanor's idea of "another life," the children of the caretaker appear and sing for them in a chorus in which: "There was something terrible in the noise they made. It was so shrill, so discordant, and so meaningless"[33] that the Pargiters cannot understand a word of it but all the same feel it is extraordinarily beautiful. The shrill and nonsensical cacaphony is the song of the rising generation which is to be repeated in *Between the Acts* as the prelude for the last scene "Ourselves."

The dawn with "the rising sun and the extraordinarily blue sky" has a magical power to give the Pargiters as they stand gathered at the window "a statuesque air for a moment, as if they were carved in

31) *Ibid.*, p. 462.
32) *Ibid.*, p. 462.
33) *Ibid.*, p. 464.

stone. Their dresses fell in stiff sculptured fold."[34] And Eleanor who has something of the seer sees beyond ordinary things a vision, the familiar image used for the conclusion to *A Room of One's Own*, of a young couple in a taxi, the symbol of perfect humanity and the renewal and continuation of life. *The Years* has the most peaceful ending:

> The sun had risen, and the sky above the house wore an air of extraordinary beauty, simplicity and peace.[35]

Compare this ending with that of *The Waves*, which is beautiful and brave but dark and terrible with a man fighting against Death that is coming to him. *In The Waves*, although the idea of the renewal and continuation of life is suggested throughout and even at the end the dawn suggests the endless cycle of time and life, there is no peace and serenity at the end of this book. Death is the protagonist that destroys Bernard. At the end of *The Years* the emphasis is put reversely. All through the novel individual death is treated rather lightly in the manner of "Time Passes" of *To the Lighthouse* and towards the end, Eleanor's sense of Life is strong enough to push her fear of "the dark tunnel" away.

The last pages of *The Years* impress us with the author's aspiration and praise for "beauty, simplicity, and peace" in spite of all the pathetic dark scenes the Pargiters have come through. In order to give this elevated feeling to the ending the speaker must necessarily be Eleanor who is naiive, optimistic and enduring like some Willa

34) *Ibid.*, p. 467.
35) *Ibid.*, p. 469.

Cather heroine. Is Eleanor another voice in Virginia Woolf, the voice of affirmation which was audible, though not quite convincing, in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*? Although Eleanor is not a typically Woolfian agnostic character and therefore fails in a sense to appeal strongly enough to the reader's mind, she does speak in the tone of the author's another voice that definitely means to be affirmative of Life.

Virginia Woolf is better at creating extraordinary persons than the ordinary though she declares her interest in the latter. Being herself an eccentric, she seems to have been more at home writing of the eccentric. Among the characters in *The Years* Sara Pargiter, the daughter of the beautiful Eugenie, is a unique and interesting woman, a new type like Eleanor among Virginia Woolf's people. We imagine Sara Pargiter may share with the author her visionary world crowded with fantastic imaginings to which she was too often and irresistibly drawn. Sara lives on the borderline between the worlds of imagination and reality, talking poetry absent-mindedly.

> "But I had a talisman, a glowing gem, a lucent emerald" —— she picked up an envelope that lay on the floor —— "a letter of introduction. And I said to the flunkey in peach-blossom trousers, 'Admit me, sirrah,' and he led me along corridors piled with purple till I came to a door, a mahogany door, and knocked; and a voice said, 'Enter.' And what did I find? • • • A stout man with red cheeks. On his table three orchids in a vase. Pressed into your hand, I thought, as the car crunches the gravel by your wife at parting. • • • [36]

She is poor and must earn her living, so she takes the letter of

36) *Ibid.*, p. 368.

introduction, for which she uses the ironical metaphors of "a talisman," "a gem," to an office run by "a man in a sponge-bag trousers" who used to know her father at Oxford. Even the sight of the "three orchids" on a table instigates her imaginative mind to fly off into the air away from the reality. Her description of the newspaper office is:

> "There was a humming and a grinding. The great machines went round; and little boys popped in with elongated sheets; black sheets; smudged; damp with printer's ink."[37]

Poetry goes well with Sara, a gaunt fairy, a sexless lover who loves a man "who loves the other sex." Her talk is always such a mixture of reality and imagined things that North cannot help wondering: "How much of that was true?"[38] Sara seems to answer the author's desire for fantasy in this novel of fact.

The Years is the book about which critics differ very much. To some it is about the second worst novel written by Virginia Woolf[39] (*Night and Day* being the worst), while to others it is a really very good book.[40] It is true that most scenes of *The Years* prove the author's mature command of style. To decide exactly why it is worse than her other books if at all is a difficult task. Perhaps the intensity is lost when she ceases to talk about her soul. We may say simply that she was getting old. What we can say for certain about *The Years* is that she made the same kind of blunder she had made in

37) *Ibid.*, p. 368.
38) *Ibid.*, p. 368.
39) V. Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, p. 280.
40) James Hafley, *The Glass Roof: Virginia Woolf as Novelist* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1954), p. 142.

Mrs. Dalloway —— that she started to write a chronicle but ended in writing something different —— a novel made of images and metaphors because in her the tug to fantasy was always too strong.

The Years is a chronicle which is not entirely a chronicle. It starts as a novel of facts with a number of extremely well-written, realistic passages. But it is not a chronicle in the sense that it tells only of the years that are of symbolic significance in a sketch-like manner. The question seems to be concerned with the fact, however, that towards the end, the whole tone becomes too definitely symbolical for this kind of novel. Virginia Woolf herself was a little worried about the ending but was reassured by Keynes.[41] The ending of *The Years* is rather like such plays by Chekhov as *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard* in which after the pathetic four acts the last act points toward the future with hope and aspiration. This goes well with Chekhov's *fin de sciecle* people and dramatic arrangement of the whole acts, yet even Chekhov seems to be already a little too simple and optimistic, too old-fashioned to appeal to the agonized mind of the twentieth century reader. With such an ending, *The Years* assumes a rather sentimental aspect toward the end as the author had recognized and been worried about.

Virginia Woolf had been interested in complex and sophisticated characters up to *The Waves* in spite of her sympathy with "a Mrs. Brown." She seems to have become more interested in simple people in her last period. We may say, however, that Virginia Woolf is

41) V. Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, p. 283.

more Virginia Woolf when she writes about sophisticated people, that is, these who are "her kind." There are some unique would-be heroines in *The Years* indeed —— such women as Kitty, Eugenie and Sara. But they come and go like everybody else and do not stay in the scenes to take important roles. And for that matter the simple and good-hearted Eleanor is not exactly the heroine of *The Years*. *The Years* is about "ordinary people" who come in and out of the scenes as they live through the passing years. The Pargiters and their friends and relations are more solid and real beings than those in *Jacob's Room* who were compared to "a procession of shadows"; yet we cannot help feeling that the protagonist of this novel is not the "people" but the "years" as finally and wisely named by the author.

All these points may be sugguested as the reasons why *The Years* is inferior to her other works. She wanted to write about people, of the human race as existing in history, carrying high the torch of life, for it is "Life that matters, nothing but life" as Katherine Hilbery once told herself. *The Waves* tells of the mystic life and death of the individual existence with a suggestion for the renewal, the endless cycle of time, through the description of the sun and the sea. In *The Years* Virginia Woolf tries to express in a clearer way her long cherished idea about the continuation of life —— Clarissa Dalloway's transcendental theory, which she had already expressed parabolically in *Orlando* by denying death and asserting the changeless in humanity through the changing ages. With its sentimentalism and optimism, and certain flaws in the form, *The Years* deserves criticism. It is the

book written in the last period of the author's life, in which her creative power was going downhill all the may. Yet we see the author forming and giving an expression to her life philosophy through the form as experiment. By reading *The Years* we realize again that Virginia Woolf loved the fantastic and that she could approach and reveal the reality better to us when she allowed herself to build her dwellingplace in the air, just a little above the day-to-day reality made of facts, with metaphors and symbols as her bricks and tools. The last symbolic scene of *The Years* is to be taken over in *Between the Acts* in which the author returns to the symbolist method in which she excels best.